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Myth in the Structure of Human Mind and Hermeneutics of Myth: on Possibility of a Hermeneutic Explanation of Myth[1]

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the structure of human thinking by means of the concept “myth”. The starting points are several prominent theories on this subject which are in agreement that myth is neither a simple opposition to logos nor that it allows for separating strictly purely irrational and purely rational thinking. However, these theories demonstrate very different ways of understanding myth, its relation to logos and its functions in the structure of human consciousness. Therefore my paper aims at developing a systematic conceptual frame for the “myth” and the so called mythical thinking by means of convergence of several methods and forms of inquiry about the complex relations between theories of meaning and theories of myth. Its innovative character consists in the systematic examining structures of mythical thinking with help of conceptual tools coming from the nowadays largely forgotten hermeneutic tradition of Georg Misch und Josef König, which until now has not been applied to this subject matter. I will examine to what extent this theory can be helpful for the understanding of myth and explanation of its role in thinking and life of modern humanity.

Key words

myth, rationality, human mind, hermeneutics, mechanism, conceptual imagination, productivity, narrative

Plurality of Myth Conceptions

Myth has been for a long time a preoccupation of philosophy which has defined itself, as a rule, in opposition to myth. The typical logos/myth oppositions, which express tensions between these phenomena are rational/irrational, conscious/unconscious, reasonable/affective, true/false, episteme/doxa etc. Myth, as a positive subject-matter of philosophy of culture, was introduced into Western thought by Vico, Schelling and Hegel. In the twentieth century, myth became a focal point of reflections in a variety of approaches – anthropological, ethnological, psychoanalytic, political, cultural, and epistemological.[1] Each of these theories attempted to understand the phenomenon “myth”, but a general result of the 20th century discussion on myth is that this concept has lost its clear contour. In what follows, there are some major approaches which may serve as illustrations for this claim.

a) Myth from the Neo-Kantian Perspective of Theory of Knowledge. According to Cassirer, myth shares with logos the symbolic character but its symbols do not yet distinguish between sign and signified since they attempt to make present what they symbolize. Although Cassirer acknowledges that myth fulfils an ordering function analogous to rational structures and considers it a generative matrix of culture, his approach to myth has several restrictions. On the one hand, he believes that the analysis of myth would lead us to a particular „fundamental level of human thought, emotion, and will“ (Cassirer 1977). On the other hand, it was his principal concern to demonstrate an increasing degree of abstraction of the symbolic forms; therefore his attention is

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focused on the maturing and „self-liberation of the concept" ("Selbstbefreiung des Begriffs") (Cassirer 1994, 120). Thus, Cassirer's phenomenology of the human spirit still conforms to the rationalism with its emphasis on the priority of discursive thinking.[2] Cassirer's concept of the symbol (Symbolbegriff) still preserves the character of the concept (Begriff). It was his main task to demonstrate how the concept manifests itself in different cultural spheres such as myth, language and science. In line with it, myth appears to be an immature form of conceptual thinking.

Cassirer's account, therefore, leaves us with some questions. One concerns the status of myth within the ensemble of symbolic forms from the perspective of their development. This topic was a subject of intensive discussion during the 1990s (Orth 1996, Paetzold 1994, Krois 1988, Poma 1988, Schwemmer 1997), and there is as yet no ultimate resolution of the issue. A related question concerns a status of myth in the life of modern society. For Cassirer, myth characterizes a phase in the history of human thinking which should be overcome but which remains alive in the back so that men can return to it. However, this return means a regress to the primitive form of consciousness and rudimentary stages of culture. In this case, myth appears to be "the *ultima ratio*" (Cassirer 2007, 274). If myth is only seen as a kind of regression, however, it is difficult to see how it can make any constructive contribution to society.

b) Myth from the Perspective of Structural Anthropology. According to Levi-Strauss, myth provides an ordering of features of human life and is, as far as it determines order and provides solutions to problems, comparable to rational order: "[…] the kind of logic which is used by mythical thought is as rigorous as that of modern science, and […] the difference lies not in the quality of the intellectual process, but in the nature of the things to which it is applied." (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 444) Since a mythical order does not need to obey to what is commonly considered the rules of rationality, it can deal with contradictory descriptions of the world simply by arranging them (ibid.) Since myth encapsulates hidden modalities of the conditio humana, it has a double structure, both historical and ahistorical. Myth is historically specific, i.e. related to its context, and, at the same time, ahistorical insofar as its constituent units – "the bundles of relations" (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 431) – are universal and timeless: it "makes it possible to discover the operational modes of the human mind, which have remained so constant over the centuries and are so widespread" (Lévi-Strauss 1981, 627). Similar to Cassirer's approach, myth is not only seen as a specific way of cognition of the world, but also as reflecting forms of life and social practices.

Lévi-Strauss' analysis of myths was criticised from early on since it disregards the narrative surface structure of myths and superimposes seemingly arbitrarily chosen orderings whose timelessness might be closer to Platonic ideas than to actual features of mythical thought (Oppitz 1975). Therefore, in attempting to put myth and rationality on an equal footing he turns myth into a variety of rationality rather than conceives it as something different from or complementary to rationality.

c) Myth from the Existential-Evolutionist Perspective. Blumenberg provides insight into formative aspects of a modern critical myth-making that overcomes the limits of logical reasoning in face of existential challenges. He ascribes to myth a universal function, namely the cognitive, psychological and practical mastery of reality. He argues that mythopoesis begins as an adaptive human response to the existential experience, as a response to the threat of "the absolutism of reality" (Blumenberg 1979, 11). Myth is, therefore, a rationalization of fear and anxiety. In contrast to Cassirer, Blumenberg stresses "myth's genuine quality as [a cultural-historical] accomplishment" (Blumenberg 1990, 168) to ratio. He asserts that as long as there are elements

of external reality that resist the human activity, there will always be a place for myth within human thought and practice.

In Blumenberg's view, myth is neither a preform nor an alternative to reason that one can encounter in archaic cultures. Moreover, myth is not something that exists, but it is something that is constantly created as a permanent attempt to conceptualise and understand reality. This, however, should not be understood as a theoretical approach to myth: "The boundary line between logos and myth is imaginary" (Ibid.). This implies a closer interweaving of supposedly rational and supposedly mythical thinking as Cassirer and Levi-Strauss have seen them.

d) Myth from the Perspective of Structural Semiotics. Another conception of myth was developed within structural semiotics (Barthes, Derrida, Durand). For example, Barthes offers a semiotic theory of myth in his work *Mythologies* (Barthes 1984). According to him, myth is a form of signifying speech and it is, in fact, the process in which society grants meaning to the world around it. For Barthes, every cultural product can be conditioned by myth. Myth is explained by him in the sense of social epistemology as a form of social group consciousness that is of an ideological nature. At the same time, myth is for him a socio-political phenomenon by means of which some political and economic goals can be achieved. Thus, myth is a kind of institutionalizing of power; that is why it may be seen as a universal element of social structure.

From the perspective of the explanation of myth, structural semiotics' major contribution to the theory of myth may be seen in replacing the direct reference by a complex mechanism of interpretation. Myth is distinguished from ordinary sign use by a double structure of signification. The whole of sign-signified turns into the sign for a mythical meaning on a second level of signification. The first level of meaning does not disappear, however, so that first- and second level meaning can interact and conflict. Barthes' semiotic approach transfers the discrepancy and interrelation between myth and rationality on a new and interesting terrain which is transparent in its basic functioning. However, it neither offers an explanation how myths origins in human thought, nor does it elucidate the ordering and organizing work done by myths, which is rightly put into focus by Cassirer and Lévi-Strauss.

e) Myth from the Perspective of Political and Cultural Studies. Thanks to Cassirer,[3] myth became a privileged category of conceptual and historical primacy in the cultural, social and political studies. The literature on myth within post-colonial, feminist and political studies has been growing vastly. A survey of it would go beyond limits of this paper.

However, some approaches which are relevant for the understanding myth should be mentioned. One possible way to evaluate the political significance of myth was inaugurated by Horkheimer und Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. They traced the Enlightenment back to a mythical root and discover that Enlightenment and myth do not form a simple opposition, but they are dialectically intertwined. Therefore, the mythical appearance of 20th century's totalitarian and capitalist societies is nothing but a demonstration of this ambivalent dialectic. However, their attempt to trace myth back to the basic cognitive structure of concept subordination underestimates the complexity of human cognitive processes.

Most modern theorists treat myth as an inevitable and important element of contemporary society. In cultural and political theory, it is seen as source of individual and collective identity (Frank 1983, Jamme 1991a,

Jamme1991b). For example, political myths which are aimed at consolidating nations are now commonly defined "not as merely and utterly fictional stories", but rather as "foundational stories, namely as stories that purport to explain the present in terms of some event that occurred in the past" (Barasch 2008, 138). Chiara Bottici considers political myth as "mapping devices through which we look at the world, come to feel about it, and therefore also act within it as a social group" (Bottici 2016, cp. Wingo 2003). She emphasises some significant aspects of modern research into myth, which are relevant for understanding myth in general: "Three elements are therefore central to the concept of myth: narrative, significance and process" (Bottici 2007, 15).

The common crucial core of these theories is the acknowledgment of the irreducible creativity of society and history, which, in turn, implies the assumption that signification and meaning-giving act reflexively, not referentially.

Some Preliminary Results of this Analysis. At the outset, I have already pointed out that this overview is not complete[4]. This selection of prominent theories demonstrates, however, that a common tendency of twentieth century positions on myth is the assumption that myth and rationality share basic features. Although most approaches oppose myth and rationality, they can be read as suggesting that myth and rationality may, to some extent, be cut from the same cloth. Noteworthy is, moreover, that myth has become a subject matter in the analysis of such different topics as consciousness, thinking and cognition, as well as culture, politics and social structures.

One cannot expect a concept of myth which is common to all theories since every theory defines myth along its own parameters. However, common ground seem to be some characteristics such as being a narrative which is shared by a particular group in order to explain and pass on that group's values, beliefs, knowledge, and traditions, and as being a fundamental cognitive scheme for the ordering and / or symbolic modelling of reality. Beyond that, myth is also considered a form of action and life.

It is obvious from this overview that there are alternative theories of myth which are hardly compatible with each other. In itself, such a result is hardly surprising in philosophy but it becomes unsatisfying in view of the similarities between these theories. They all seem to be after a quite similar understanding of myth but to miss it because of focusing on features which might not go deep enough into the source of myth in human thought. The tendency to oppose myth and rationality, or to see myth as a precursor of modern rationality, or as a regressive form of it, is one reason for this limitation. Therefore, it is worth investigating what myth is and whether myth can be seen as a permanent and constitutive element of human consciousness (and a fortiori also of social life).

Possibility of a Hermeneutic Theory of Myth

In order to investigate whether, and if so, how myth can be regarded as a necessary component of the very structure of human thought, one can propose a new methodological basis by appealing to hermeneutics.

The expression "hermeneutics" does not have a well-defined place in the philosophical vocabulary, given the large number of such theories. Best known are the German and French schools of hermeneutics: the theories of Schleiermacher, Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur and Durand are some examples of hermeneutic thought. Whilst philosophical hermeneutics is generally – and to some extend erroneously – conceived of as a Neo-Heideggerian (Gadamer and others) field, I am focusing on a less known branch of philosophical hermeneutics and refer to the

forgotten hermeneutic tradition of Dilthey's school, to which Georg Misch and Josef König belong.[5]

The choice of this methodological framework can be justified, first, by reference to the European philosophical-historical tradition of the "reform of logic" (Plessner 1981). This endeavour was at the centre of debates between phenomenology, Neo-Kantianism, hermeneutics, philosophical anthropology and philosophy of life at the beginning of the twentieth century, and gave rise to the theories of Georg Misch and Josef König. Misch's main concern was the "extension" (Erweiterung) of logic in the direction of "hermeneutic logic", which should result in an alternative to the traditional theory of knowledge. König's critical reflections on cognition as a meaningful *access* to the world, through which the world itself is constituted, can be named "analytical hermeneutics". What is important here is that the common goal of these theories is to demonstrate the limits of discursive reason by introducing an innovative theory of meaning which concentrates on non-discursive and non-inferential thinking.

This theory seems to be a promising approach as a methodological basis because it does not restrict itself to the analysis of the forms of thinking within "a space of reasons", but also envisages alternative mechanisms within the broad framework of hermeneutic interpretation of the world. The developing of these ideas makes possible, for example, not only to consider mythical symbols as "presentational symbols" (Langer 1965, 191) or to describe a "trajectory of meaning" (Durand 1969), where the symbolic meaning is extended between meaningful images and pure cognitive meanings, but gives an insight into the process of original productive conceptual imagination, by means of which the human world is not merely reflected (abgebildet), but created (hingebildet).

On the basis of these fundamental tenets, I try to develop a kind of logical-hermeneutic approach to the analysis of myth, which includes such aspects as (a) theory of meaning; (b) theory of narration; (c) "lingualism"; (d) theory of logical metaphor; and (e) theory of subjectivity.

Ad a) In my view, Misch and König have worked out a specific hermeneutic theory of meaning on the basis of Dilthey's philosophy of life, which can be seen as an alternative both to the traditional "continental" theory of knowledge and analytical theory of meaning. The following key concepts can be relevant for the specification of myth in its relation to language and thinking. It is, first, Misch's two types of discourse (Rede) – the "pure discursive" (rein discursive Rede) and the "evocative" discourse (evozierende Rede) (Misch 1967; 1994). Second, there are König's concepts "determining predicates" and "modifying predicates" as well as "theoretical sentences" and "practical sentences" (König 1978; 1994). These approaches make possible to reconstruct theoretically conclusive concepts of the creative hermeneutic productivity of the human being and to define the place of mythical thinking within the whole sphere of meaning-giving.

The next argument for the appealing to these authors is their deep insight into the mechanisms of thinking. They demonstrate, first, that we must differentiate between the discursivity of thought and the discursivity of language. Whilst the language is per se discursive, the thought can be either discursive – when one thinks through and in words or concepts – or non-discursive (intuitive, combinatoric, etc). Second, beside causality, they accentuate significance (Bedeutsamkeit) and not reference as a principle of meaning-making. Third, they show that the faculty of spontaneous production of linguistic symbols without the ontological support of images or external objects is an anthropological characteristic of the human being.

The outlined mechanisms can be used as analytical tools for understanding myth within the ensemble of different forms of thinking. On the theoretical basis of this hermeneutic tradition, the key hypothesis provided in this treatise is that a *source of myth can be found in the human capacity of productive conceptual imagination*, which does not need a reference to the sensually perceivable objects for creating meaning. If it is accepted, the next task will be to justify the connection of "myth" with this productive hermeneutic activity and to concretize the concept "myth" taking into account the relationship between myth and non-discursive thinking.

Ad b) Along with the concepts "(non)-discursivity" and "evocation", the concept of "narrative" can be a part of analytical instruments by analysing myth. Myth is often considered a kind of narrative through which human beings master their relationships to the world. Although the term "narrative" may be used in different ways in literature, ethnology, politics, sociology, etc., it is significant, that, according to many authors, narration plays a significant role in cognition.[6] The approach to narrative I am proposing in this paper shares this assumption, but differs from the traditional presentation of the problem in several important respects.

First of all, the enquiry into the connection between narration and myth is guided by the premise that narration should be understood in terms of Misch and König as *articulation of lived experience* (Erlebnis) by the individual. In this case, "articulation" is grasped not as emotive or propositional[7], but as a form of primary cognitive hermeneutic practice, which provides an immediate access to the world. This premise is based on the idea that to articulate experience in words does not mean to convert experience into something else, but rather that verbalisation enables experience to realize itself for the first time (cp. Misch 1967, 1994; König 1937, 1994). Hence, narration is not merely a description of the given phenomena, but, on the contrary, these phenomena themselves derive their very existence from the narrative. Narration does not translate a given experience into words; rather, speaking immediately constitutes experience. That means that rather than supposing that narrative is a media *through* which an independently existing world is observed, we may accept that phenomena are seen not *through* the narrative, but in *it*. From this perspective, one can expect that myth results from narration, which means productive praxis of transformation of lived experience into words and has a character of immediate experience.

Ad c) A further relevant aspect explaining the mechanisms of mythical thought consists in the examination of the conditions of explicative articulation. It is possible to make use of the approach which is known as "lingualism". One of the most prominent advocates of the version of lingualism which argues that language is essential to thought is Donald Davidson (2001). But there is also another version of lingualism which refers to the hermeneutic tradition of Dilthey's school and is based on the assumption that human rationality is characterized by the fact that thinking and thought (i.e. what-is-thought-about) intrinsically belong together. König was one of the first to point out the importance of "thinking in the accusative" for comprehending the nature of human thought. Whereas Davidson incorporates intentionality through the relation of reference into his theory of meaning, König interprets intentionality as the "what-is-thought-about", as "the thinking in the accusative" or the "it-thinking", which is only possible thanks to conceptual imagination and for which a directly reference to objects is not necessary at all.

This version of hermeneutic lingualism seems to be promising for the examination whether language is merely a tool for expression of thought, or the very structure of human thinking has a linguistic nature, since it supports an assumption that this ability of the human being to the productive "it-thinking" can be regarded as an anthropological condition for the capacity of myth.

Ad d) Another linguistic mechanism of thinking from which myth can emerge can be the metaphoric nature of our words. In linguistics, metaphor is simply the understanding and experiencing of one thing in terms of another. The basis of this idea is a comparison that shows how things that are not alike in most ways are similar in another important way.

In philosophy, metaphor is often understood as a means of cognition (Müller, Nietzsche, Mauthner, Cassirer, etc.) For example, in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), George Lakoff and Mark Johnson introduce the notion of "conceptual metaphors", which are cognitively important, not just in language, but also in thought and action. For Richard Boyd (1993) and Max Black (1979), theory-constitutive metaphors are more interesting from the scientific perspective. Even so, the understanding of metaphor by these authors is traditional: they are essentially concerned with linguistic metaphors.

In contrast, I assume that linguistic metaphor must be distinguished from *logical metaphor*. König and Blumenberg were the first to explicitly introduce the concept of logical metaphor. Blumenberg's *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* gives an excellent insight into the metaphoric nature of meaning. This book outlines one of his central theoretical points: the limits of conceptuality and the role of various modes of non-conceptuality (absolute metaphor, myth, glosses, etc.). His concept of the "absolute metaphor" supports the argument for the significance of the logical metaphor in the creating of meaning.

However, it was König who based his theory of the so called "practical sentences" on the concept of logical metaphor. For him, logical metaphor does not explicate the similarity of things; on the contrast, the logical metaphor makes it possible to explicate a thing or a situation for the first time. In other words, logical metaphor creates things for us through singling them out through their practical significance for us. It makes something visible by connecting a non-symbolic realm of meaning with a symbolic realm (linguistic as well as with visual, musical and other forms). The non-verbal mechanism of logical metaphor enables us to feel or act ourselves into a symbol. Thus, the non-linguistic, logical metaphors have their foundation in human activity and human experience: they reflect human actions and human attitude toward things. The logic of metaphors can, hence, be ultimately founded in pragmatic.

The benefit of such a theory of meaning may be that it does not restrict itself to propositionalism, inferential und referential procedures, since it would exclude from the scope of meaning the entire range of meaningful and significant relationships, structural influences of social actions, and the interpretative activity of human beings. It emphasises that all these aspects can be grasped by means of logical metaphor. Therefore, this theory provides a plausible insight both into the metaphoric nature of the meaning as "it-thinking" and the practical nature of metaphor as well. The concept of logical metaphor can give us a fascinating resource for rethinking the building of meaning that promotes theory of myth, and gives it a new impulse. Following this line of argumentation, myth can be analysed in terms of its logical-metaphoric constitution.

Ad e) Last but not least is the contribution of the factor of subjectivity to the understanding myth. In its most widespread application, "subjectivity" means the phenomenality of human consciousness and it is widely discussed whether and how it influences our cognitive relation to the world. In contrast, Misch's and König's hermeneutic anthropology claims that the main characteristic of human mind is that the human being not only knows (feels) something, but she also knows that it is she who knows (feels) something. This seems to imply that it is self-awareness that distinguishes us as creatures that are capable of narrative articulation of experience.

In line with this argumentation, one can assume that there is a special self-reflective structure of human subjectivity which intermediates between consciousness and world. Accepting this basic tenet, a suggestion is allowed that one universal source for myth can lay in the self-reflective structure of mind, which provides the differential between an input and an effect (word, concept, idea, etc.).

Conclusion

As appears from this analysis, logical hermeneutics sees human thinking as including from the outset several features which are commonly employed to distinguish myth from rationality. But if human thinking is inevitably imaginative, narrative, and metaphorical, these characteristics are no longer available for setting apart myth from rationality. Using logical hermeneutics, therefore, it is possible to demonstrate that myth and rational thinking are not only intertwined but fundamentally cognate. If this is the case, the traditional opposition which is preserved in all modern theories of myth needs a fundamental revision. It remains a task for such a revision to see to what extent the specific oppositions postulated in the modern theories of myth can be reformulated. I guess that myth and rationality will appear as two different ways to emphasize genuine features of human thought rather than as opposites.

To sum up, by way of an affirmative and at the same time critical application of the hermeneutic theory of meaning *à la* Misch and König, it is possible to examine whether myth originates from the very structure of human thinking, is a part of human rationality and has a universal validity. These theories appear to provide a promising avenue of interpretation, in so far as they provide an important methodological framework and a conceptual scheme for understanding the structures of meaning-making. The five factors, namely the productive conceptual imagination, the creative articulation of lived experience, the capacity of thinking in the accusative, the logical-metaphoric mechanism of meaning-building and the self-reflective structure of human consciousness, which are formulated on the basis of these theories, can build the fundament for a novel theory of myth.

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Endnotes

1 For a lucid and helpful overview of the leading theories of myth see Cohen 1969, *Stambovsky* 1996, Segal 1999, Segal 2004.

2 On a recent criticism of Cassirer along similar lines, see Pedersen 2009, Recki 2012, Steineck 2014.

3 For example, Henry Tudor writes: “The theorist who, more than any other, has drawn attention to the use of myths in contemporary politics is Ernst Cassirer.” (Tudor 1972, 31)

4 This collection of theories may be complemented by the theories of Freud, Jung and Lacan, James Frazer, Mircea Eliade, Bronisław Malinowski, Edward Tylor, Rudolf Bultmann, Hans Jonas, William Robertson Smith, Jane Harrison, Joseph Campbell, Northrop Frey, Samuel H. Hooke, Kurt Hübner and many others. Concerning the political myth one can consult such authors as Geoffrey S. Kirk, Cornelius Castoriadis*, Gerhard von Graevenitz and* Charles *Taylor.* But this would only demonstrate how intense the debate is, with differing opinions expressed on everything from issues of methodology and epistemology to the meaning of myth itself.

5 This branch of hermeneutics has been analysed by Bollnow (1964, 1983); Plessner (1985); Gadamer (1986); Kühne-Bertram (1993, 1995); Rodi (2003); Jung (2009); Ginev (2006, 2008, 2011); Schürmann (1999, 2011). Two collections of papers *Dilthey Jahrbuch* für *Philosophie und Geschichte der Geisteswissenschaften* (Bd. 11, 1997–98) and *DiltheyJahrbuch* für *Philosophie und Geschichte der Geisteswissenschaften* (Bd. 7, 1990–91) devoted König and Misch can be seen as the remarkable contribution to studies in this field.

6 Cp. Genette 1976; Mitchell 1981; Stanzel 1984; Prince 1982; Rouse 1990; Lamarque/Olsen 1994; *Niles* 1999; Green 2000, Lamarque 2014.

7 There is a debate on the nature of a lived experience in modern literature. The concept “lived experience” is often seen either as emotive or propositional (see Köppe 2008).

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